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Actions speak louder than words: how employees mind the implementation gap

## **Abstract**

Integral to employees' working lives are the HR policies and more importantly, the practices that follow those and their implementation, which employees experience directly. To date, research on HR implementation considers how HRM is 'done to' employees by management and therefore ignores the agency of individuals to shape how HRM is 'done to them'. Taking the perspective of employees, in a qualitative study of female lawyers, this paper examines employees' roles in shaping HR implementation, addressing a lack of understanding about the role of 'others' in the process. Drawing on the concept of social power, the article focuses on the implementation of agile working practices within UK-based law firms. It finds that despite lacking legitimate position power to influence processes, employees draw on a variety of other power sources (e.g. referent, information, coercive) and tactics (e.g. leveraging membership of professional networks) in order to influence their working environment with respect to HR policy and practice, particularly in response to perceived implementation gaps. The current study underlines that employees may be integral to bridging the gap between policy and practice and therefore to ensuring the link between HRM and organisational performance. It also proposes that behavioural responses to HR practices should be considered in future theorising of the HRM-performance relationship.

## **Keywords**

HRM, Implementation, practices, agency, flexibility, power

## **Introduction**

While the recent HRM research landscape reveals a preoccupation with linking HRM in organisations to performance (Boxall, 2012), there has been a shift within this arena from considering which practices in particular predict superior performance to what has been termed the ‘black box’ – the lack of understanding about what underlies the relationship between those HR practices and performance (e.g. Wright, Gardner, Moynihan and Allen, 2005). Accordingly, Boxall (2012) surmised that research can add value if theorising aims to analyse the ‘chain of links’ within the black box to understand process not just content underlying HR systems. As such, recent research has investigated the idea that how policies are implemented may shed light on their ability to elicit performance (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), with evidence that this process is instrumental in how employees feel about and respond to their organisation (Khilji and Wang, 2006).

While attention has redirected towards process, and has provided insight into HR implementation, this focus has been biased. Notably, and understandably, the role of line managers and HR professionals in implementation has received particular attention (see, for example, special issue ‘HRM and the line’ in *Human Resource Management*, 2013). Hutchinson and Purcell (2003), for instance, show that line managers, and their role in ‘bringing to life’ HR policy, are essential for predicting whether HR practices have their intended effect. Often, the locus of responsibility for HR implementation is examined – usually pitting HR professionals against line management (Brewster & Holt Larsen, 2000). What these and many other observers (e.g. Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013) have in common is to place the main focus of HR implementation on those in managerial positions within organisations. While this may

be accurate, it excludes the study of employees in the process, at the risk of implying that they are passive recipients of HRM (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2015). Given that employees directly experience HR practices, it is reasonable to expect that they might react to them. As Ortner, (1992, p193) states: ‘social beings, with their diverse motives and their diverse intentions, make and transform the world in which they live’ - and this is not confined to just those in authority. This may be why Kirton, Robertson and Avdelidou-Fischer (2016) state that expanding the focus of HR implementation theorising to non-managerial employees may be worthy of additional research and why the present study takes the perspective of employees. To this end, this paper summarises the findings of a study that responds to calls to understand the role of ‘others’ in HR implementation (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2015). In doing so, the paper contributes in different ways; first, it illuminates the role of employees in the HR implementation process. This provides an alternative perspective, which has heretofore been ignored and has thus meant only a partial understanding of the actions and processes that come to bear on HR implementation. Specifically, it identifies female employees’ motives for involvement and the particular junctures of the process at which they intervene. Second, using the concept of social power, it reveals the resources and strategies that these employees utilise to influence the enactment of practices that affect their working lives. This can provide managers with a better understanding of the implications of a gap between policy and practice, and how employees are attempting to bridge that gap. Such knowledge can inform attempts to ensure that HR practices are more likely to lead to performance, but also that steps can be taken to mitigate the effects of employees experiencing the implementation gap.

The paper is organised as follows: an overview is provided of the literature on the role of employees in HR implementation, along with an explanation of social power and its potential relevance in this process. The qualitative research design is described, along with data collection methods and the approach taken to analysis. Results are presented, highlighting the strategies female workers employ in shaping HR implementation, followed by a discussion of implications for research and practice. The paper concludes with limitations and future research directions

### **HR Implementation and the Role of Employees**

The process of HR implementation remains contested in the literature with, for example, different authors supporting different start and end points (Bondarouk, Trullen & Valverde, 2016). This paper adopts Guest and Bos-Nehles' (2013) conceptualisation of the process because their analytical framework has empirical support (e.g. Woodrow and Guest, 2014) and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the junctures at which employees could have a role in the process. Their framework identifies four stages, namely the introduction or significant alteration to an HR practice; the design and quality assurance of the practice; its implementation at the operational level; and the quality of that implementation. They also indicate who typically takes responsibility for each stage. While within their framework employees do not have an active role in any of the stages, they are included as potential 'primary evaluators' at the last two stages; they will be one set of stakeholders judging the effectiveness of implementation. Describing their evaluating role, Guest and Bos-Nehles highlight the potentially divergent needs/interests of employees to other stakeholders (such as line managers) that shape that judgement. However they stop short of suggesting employees do more than pass judgement on the HRM they

experience. This is not uncommon; indeed Janssens & Steyaert (2009) state: ‘little or no attention has been given to the possibility that different employees actively engage in different ways with HR practices, undermining, delaying or supporting the implementation of HR practices’ (p150). That employees may intervene in HR implementation makes sense given it is a part of organisational life that directly concerns them, especially when divergent interests may lead them to perceive that organisational practices are not meeting their needs.

### **Employees’ motives for engaging with HR implementation**

Social exchange has been supported as an explanation for the link between HRM and organisational performance (e.g. Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang and Takeuchi, 2007). Via the mechanism of social exchange and associated norms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964), it is argued that HRM works to elicit performance and commitment of employees through the organisation’s demonstration of commitment to them and their needs by providing relevant and personally useful HR practices (Piening, Baluch & Salge, 2013). However, from an organisational justice perspective, equity theory, which is concerned with the equitable distribution of benefits (Adams, 1965), suggests that when an individual perceives inequity in an exchange, they may be motivated to respond. Thus, applied here, where an employee is aware of HR policy purported to address their concerns but does not in practice, they may be motivated to redress the imbalance. Equity theory proposes possible strategies that may be employed to that end, including an employee reducing their efforts, leaving the exchange relationship (i.e. quitting), or attempting to distort the other party’s input into the exchange (in this case, shaping HR practices to better suit their needs). The latter suggests individual agency of employees and empirical research has observed attempts to change

practices at a systemic level, such as Tomlinson, Muzio, Sommerlad, Webley and Duff's (2013) study of lawyers. They identify how more senior lawyers attempt to 'reform the system' by successfully lobbying for new maternity policy. However, these authors find that it is seniority in an organisation or profession enabling the success of such strategies due to rights vested in individuals' hierarchical position. Bos-Nehles and Meijerink's (2015) study, on what they term 'HRM co-production (the 'active involvement of employees in HRM implementation', p3), finds that employees will engage in co-production behaviour dependent on their attributions of an organisation's motives for implementing HR practices; if they perceive genuine reasons for the HR practice, they will actively participate, and co-production is found to be linked to increased task performance. These studies represent research on employees as active participants in HR implementation, but more remains to be understood about when, why and how employees take steps to intervene. Indeed, Bos-Nehles and Meijerink (2015 p30) state that additional research should 'consider employee actions to explain effective HRM implementation'. If effective HRM implementation is that which leads to desired employee outcomes, such as their satisfaction with HR practices (e.g. Khilji & Wang, 2006), then little is known about specific strategies through which employees attempt to shape that. Bos-Nehles and Meijerink's research illuminates the role of individuals invited into the process (providing them legitimate power to influence) and Tomlinson et al.'s study points to employees' seniority facilitating their attempts (also providing legitimate power), but both say little about individuals lacking legitimate power – usually the majority in an organisation – highlighting the need to consider which resources employees use to challenge or shape organisational practices, when they are not provided the opportunity. This resonates with observations from social psychology, which suggest

that in studies of power there is a tendency to examine the ‘agency and points of view of more powerful parties, neglecting the agency [...] of less powerful parties’ (Pratto, 2015 p2). Pratto argues that much can be understood from studying the relatively powerless, as well as the powerful. Accordingly, the next section explores the concept of social power as integral to the agency that employees without formal authority (i.e. non-managerial) exercise in shaping their own worlds.

### **Social power**

HR policy formation and implementation is typically the remit of HR professionals and senior/line management (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), and as such, employees usually have no formal power to influence this process. In the absence of formal authority, individuals may seek alternative means to exert influence. Indeed, Elias (2008 p269) states: ‘power and influence do not only occur in situations where the powerholder possesses a higher status or rank than the target of the influence attempt’. As such, French and Raven’s (1959) power taxonomy of social influence may be useful in understanding how employees attempt to influence HR implementation, since it delineates power sources that originate beyond an individual’s position in an organisation and therefore enables analysis of the agency of ‘less powerful’ individuals. Raven (2001) defines social influence as the ‘change in the belief, attitude or behaviour of a person’ and social power as ‘the potential for such influence’ (p217).

French and Raven’s original typology, although seminal, undoubtedly is dated. However, its continued relevance is analysed and supported by Elias (2008 p273) who observes that many other ‘taxonomies and theories can either have their roots traced



to, or have a considerable amount in common with, the French and Raven nomenclature' and highlights how subsequent amendments and updates to the typology (e.g. Raven, 2008) have refined the concepts over time. It now includes the five types of social influence first distinguished by French and Raven - legitimate; reward; coercive; referent; and expert, as well as those subsequently incorporated: information and connection (Ansari, 1990; Hersey, Blanchard and Natemeyer, 1979). These are elaborated next, along with their potential relevance to upwardly influencing in organisations.

Legitimate power stems from the rights an individual has to make a request of another – usually associated with their position (legitimate position power). Non-managerial employees typically lack this power, but they may obtain it through other means (positions on committees, for example). Reward and coercive power can be personal or impersonal. Impersonal reward and coercive power involve an individual being able to manipulate objects and events of relevance to others. In a supervisor-employee relationship examples include increased pay or termination. However, given that the present study focuses on upward influence, such rewards are irrelevant. More relevant is personal reward or coercive power - derived from the presence or lack of approval from other individuals (as a form of reward or punishment respectively).

Referent power, as originally conceptualised, referred to the positive notion that friendship, respect, admiration or identification with another, would influence an individual's wish to carry out a request for them. Expert power (influence stemming from an individual's superior knowledge) can take positive and negative forms - the difference being whether an individual uses their expertise for the benefit of others or

only themselves. For influencing upwards, personal power sources (e.g. expert and referent) are found to be effective (Johnson, 2014).

Similar to expert power is information power – the difference is that with expert power, an individual may not understand the reasons for the request being made of them, but will regardless have faith in the requester's superior insight/knowledge; whereas (direct) informational power involves presenting information regarding a particular course of action to help the target understand the reasoning behind the request. Indirect information power entails hints or suggestions, allowing the target to draw their own conclusion about a request and its legitimacy based on information. Finally, connection power is based on the perception that an individual is well connected to other powerful individuals as a rationale for accepting their request.

Given that employees are relatively less powerful than managers or HR professionals in respect of organisational policy/practice, these non-legitimate power sources may be pertinent to understanding how an employee might successfully intervene in HR implementation, where practices are not working for them.

### **Agile working practices**

Given documented issues related to flexible working (The Telegraph, 2013), where tensions between organisational and employee needs arise, agile working may be an apt HR practice to consider in examining the influence of employees in HR implementation. No official definition of agile working exists, however, it is agreed that it encompasses flexible working, in terms of time and location, but also autonomy (Eary, 2015). While some observers highlight a difference between the terms 'agile'

and ‘flexible’, given that organisations define agile working slightly differently, and that both attempt to achieve the same ends, it is argued that the terms can be used interchangeably (Lake, 2016) and are in this study. Fawcett (2013) notes a bias in the use of this type of policy by women because of their heavier burden of caring responsibilities and its utility for managing the work/non-work interface. Although ostensibly beneficial to both the employee and organisation, agile working potentially creates challenges for line managers and may therefore not be readily implemented. It is also contentious because of a pervasive culture in many industries of presenteeism (Brewer, 2000). This is evident in the legal sector, for example, where, as Bisnought (2016) puts it: ‘agile working, as it (flexible working) is referred to in legal circles, is caught in this tension caused by the challenge of adapting current models and an understandable nervousness about how this will impact on fee generation’. Indeed, the professional context may be a revealing one in which to examine how employees attempt to influence implementation of agile working since ‘the demands placed on contemporary professionals in terms of hours of work and client service mean that the rhetoric of...flexible working practices often does not translate into reality’ (Muzio and Tomlinson, 2012 p460). Thus, the legal profession provides the setting for this study.

In summary, utilising French and Raven’s framework and drawing on empirical evidence, the aim of this study was to examine the shaping of the HR implementation process (examining agile working practices), focusing on the role of a key stakeholder, the non-managerial, non-HR employee. Much of the research to date presents HR implementation as a process that only certain actors influence and may thus provide an incomplete understanding of how HR practices play out in

organisations. Thus, this study sought specifically to uncover the stages of the process at which female employees intervene and the strategies through which their agency may come to bear on how this process unfolds.

## **Methods**

### ***Research background and context***

As noted, Guest and Bos-Nehles' conceptualisation of HR implementation provides a comprehensive view of the process, starting from inception of an HR practice, through to its evaluation upon implementation. Taking this conceptualisation, one way to understand employees' role in the entire process, starting with the inception of HR practices, would be to examine greenfield sites, which have a blank slate in so far as their HR policy/practice is concerned (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). This opportunity seldom arises, so an alternative is to take advantage of trends in HRM, such as the recent shift in the legal sector towards 'agile working' (Simmons, 2015; The Lawyer, 2016), as this study has.

### ***Participants and procedure***

Mindful of the study's aims, to understand individuals' motives and strategies, a qualitative methodology was adopted. Empirical data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 individuals from a range of law firm type<sup>1</sup>, contacted via a legal professional network. One participant was not currently employed, having decided to remain at home after child bearing. Participants were based in London law firms (all of which have offices elsewhere in the country or globally). The majority held positions at Associate level, however there was also a

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<sup>1</sup> These included: magic and silver circle firms, large and mid-sized commercial firms, American, American white shoe and British multinational firms.

non fee-earning lawyer (Senior Knowledge Lawyer) and three senior individuals (Counsel and Partner level). Twelve were married and 7 had children. Their ages ranged between 26 and 47 years. Given their predominant use of agile working practices, the study focused on women's involvement in HR implementation.

All participants were interviewed either at their workplace or a convenient other location. Topics included individuals' experiences of agile working practices; perceptions about their organisation's implementation of such policy; their reaction to identified issues with policies not working in practice; and discussion about voice in their organisation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis was on-going during data collection and thereafter. In the first instance, analysis was framed by Guest and Bos-Nehles' (2013) HR implementation framework, mapping their stages onto the data to reveal when employees intervene to shape HR implementation. Following this, using Nvivo8, the data were thematically analysed, extracting overarching themes linked to different power sources (French and Raven's extended typology), then identifying lower order themes –i.e. specific mechanisms/tactics that draw on the sources of power. Notes taken during interviews were also revisited. Where there was evidence of multiple power sources being utilised in the description of a particular strategy, the extract was coded according to the greater emphasis and it was noted within the results that power sources were being utilised in tandem. Findings are presented next; comments and excerpts are labelled according to the participant number, their position and law firm type.

## **Analysis**

Asked about agile working policies at their firm, participants described a range of different practices centred around the provision of flexible working arrangements (homeworking, part-time/flexible hours etc.). The subsequent discussion about HR implementation with each participant was therefore based around the particular ‘agile working’ policy offered in their own organisation.

### ***The stages at which employees attempt to influence HR implementation***

Examining involvement in HR implementation across the stages of Guest and Bos-Nehles’ framework revealed that employee-initiated involvement was less evident in the first two stages. Impetus from employees to intervene at the first stage (raising the possibility of a new policy or change to current policy) was usually prompted by observing policies implemented and working well elsewhere (e.g. at former employers). Other motives at this stage included wishes to effect organisational change for wider benefit. For example, as members of a professional network for female lawyers, some respondents sought changes to policy to improve practices in their organisation, but also for the sector through spreading best practice. However, involvement of employees at this stage was also driven by organisations (through consultation, surveys and pilots) and was deemed by participants to be for instrumental reasons:

“I know definitely in our team there's so much focus on retention and working out why people are leaving and making sure that they can adjust things [policies] so that that doesn't happen. [P14-Senior Associate-Mid-sized commercial]

The issue of retention (linked to dissatisfaction with policy) was corroborated by other individuals. One individual, currently working through her notice period, had quit due to being unable to make the agile practices suit her situation. Another, currently not employed, had decided not to return to her firm after maternity because agreement could not be reached about part-time arrangements, despite this being an organisational policy ostensibly open to all. This finding may illuminate a lack of power to influence practices or disinclination to. Potential reasons for the latter are highlighted in a later section, under ‘legitimate power’.

At stage two (quality assurance of new practices), although there was evidence of employee involvement, the impetus, again, came from the organisation:

So it [a policy] was drafted by HR and then [...] due to my involvement in the women’s network and the fact that I was working flexibly.. that, you know, they asked me to have a look at a draft of it and I took out the horrible things and presented them with something better [P10-Senior Associate-Large Commercial]

At stages three and four (the line manager’s decision to implement an HR practice, and the quality of implementation), employees were more proactively intervening mainly because practices were not working for them.

I think there's a huge gap between what a firm thinks it's doing and what's actually happening on the ground [P4-Associate-Mid-sized commercial]

Although the definition of ‘agile working’ differed between firms, many lawyers in this sample described organisations not providing in practice what they offered on paper, describing an ‘implementation gap’ (Khilji and Wang, 2006). In this sample, a

main cause of this with respect to homeworking was an organisational culture of presenteeism:

Culturally, there will be firms who are much more sort of 'jackets-on-chairs'; you've got to have a certain amount of time present in the office and that does make it difficult for women with families or people with commitments outside of work, you know, be it looking after older people or... [P3-Senior Associate-Magic circle]

Another reason for the implementation gap was line managers' inexperience in making the practice work. Regardless of the cause, for individuals who rely on homeworking in order to manage their work/non-work interface, this gap galvanised them to intervene at these stages.

Summarising, although minimal, employee involvement in the first two stages of HR implementation was evident and driven by desire for process improvement. The junctures at which employees more actively sought to influence the process is where policy is meant to become practice - the line managers' decision to implement and the effectiveness thereof. The findings highlight employees' instrumental motives, be that ensuring HRM was working for them, or to fulfil some altruistic need to make positive change for their organisation/profession. How these individuals approached influencing the process is next considered, focusing on French and Raven's power sources.

### ***Legitimate sources***

It was acknowledged that non-managerial employees typically lack legitimate power



to effect change in HR policy. However, participants did glean legitimate power from membership of employee groups within their organisations enabling them to help shape policy:

I don't think our HR policies are good enough; we don't have a particularly great agile working policy, which we're working on now. I'm in the women's initiative and we're trying to work with the Associates Committee to try and get some more traction on that [P17-Associate-American]

Participants described subtler forms of legitimate power, stemming from social norms, in attempting to influence implementation. The 'reciprocity norm' obliges individuals to accept the requests of others who benefit them and explains why some participants believe that line managers implemented practices they would otherwise be reluctant to do so, for high performing employees:

She's exceptional in the sense that she's very, very good, and I wonder if you were less good, would they be as flexible around it. If you're good enough to be a partner, they'll do whatever they can to accommodate it and will make it work. [P13-Senior Associate-Silver circle]

Another social norm described was an invisible ranking of status linked to individuals' marital and family situation, which grants certain employees greater rights and could be employed to legitimise using policy that was ostensibly open to all.

One of my really big bugbears...when I first started working was I was single and therefore lower down the priority list. So the highest on the priority is you've got children, and I'm not denying that that should be the highest

priority but... [P1-Associate-Magic circle]

Whilst having the 'right' status could be used to ensure implementation, those lower down the ranking may experience an implementation gap driven by what they perceive to be unfair criteria and leading to differential treatment. Accordingly, employees unable to utilise this policy may react negatively to what they perceive to be the organisation's true intention with this policy (i.e. implementing practices selectively, regardless of the ostensible availability to all).

As noted, the implementation gap also emanated from cultural norms. The legitimacy of using a policy such as part-time working, because it exists and because individuals qualify to use it, did not necessarily translate into its satisfactory implementation because, indirectly, individuals may be penalised for doing so (e.g. subsequently receiving less interesting work; untenable work conditions; frustrated line managers):

At a practical level, you definitely can [utilise agile working practices] and you'd get the agreement from HR that you could do it. But at a personal and emotional level, you might find that after a while you didn't want to work here anymore. [P10-Senior Associate-Large Commercial]

This may drive a disinclination to intervene in the process of HR implementation. It also illuminates a tension between the purported signalling role of HR practices (to demonstrate that organisations value employees' concerns, e.g. agile working policy to facilitate managing multiple roles) and a contradictory culture (creating a stigma of utilising them). Such mixed signals may have implications for the HRM-performance relationship, since actions speak louder than words and employees may feel in reality that their organisation is not maintaining its side of the social exchange.

### ***Reward/Coercive power***

The use of reward power to shape HR implementation was described, specifically *personal reward power*, derived from the wish for personal approval from others. In law firms, partners typically allocate work and may select particular associates with whom they have forged working relationships (Simmons, 2017). Thus, approval from favoured associates with whom they wish to continue working is a powerful bargaining chip for employees to shape homeworking practices:

...the people that I work with, I like working for and they like me to work for them, and so I can kind of get away with whatever I want. And so I don't need a policy saying that I can work from home because I just work from home and no one notices. [P10-Senior Associate-Large Commercial]

Conversely, the following excerpt demonstrates the use of coercive forms of influence (threats to quit) from an employee seeking a part time return to work after maternity at a firm at which a policy existed but was not widely used:

I just said [...] “let’s see how we battle with this because quite frankly if you say no, I will probably walk away but I’ve got a very good CV and I know that there will be another firm that would take me quite frankly and I know that they’d pay me well. So why don’t you take that away to the partnership” [P7-Counsel-American]

While this coercive power resulted in implementation to suit that individual, its use risks the target of this influence attempt (the partner) feeling forced to accept the proposed arrangement and may set a precedent that s/he may not wish to honour for all (in this case an exception was made for this employee alone). This illuminates how

different tactics may elicit different types of agreement – compliance vs. commitment, for example (Falbe and Yukl, 1992). It also raises issues of procedural justice, should exceptions be made for individuals, such as in the above case.

### ***Referent power***

Whereas with reward power, the reliance of the partner on the employee is emphasised and was used by employees to bargain (hence a partner's need to seek approval from the employees they wish to work with), this is not the focus of referent power. Instead the emphasis is on friendship and respect. In effecting upward influence successfully, referent power was utilised, with individuals aware that personal connections could help them:

..so I mean, it's not really about policy, is it? It's kind of about the relationship that you create with the other people. [P10-Senior Associate-Large Commercial]

The leveraging of personal relationships to shape HRM alludes to in-group favouritism, which is integral to the concept of leader-member exchange (LMX - Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Again, the potential for perceived procedural injustice is highlighted, since outcomes are based on the lottery of a personality match and flexible working may be implemented on the basis of that, as was suggested by the following participant:

Some people don't have a formal arrangement but do work from home when they want to and I do think it depends how well you're viewed in the department as to how positively that is accepted. [P15-Senior Associate – Magic Circle]

While earlier research has positioned LMX as a mediator between HR implementation and outcomes (Soens, Buyens and Taylor, 2012), these findings suggest LMX may be a pre-cursor to the quality or even occurrence of HR implementation.

### ***Expert power***

Expertise was used to influence HR policy/practice; specific knowledge in employment law, and particularly the steps that can be taken when faced with inconsistent implementation, was one way of leveraging expert power:

In the employment group it's not an unnatural conversation [about HR policies] because we're thinking all the time in our professional lives about discrimination and issues like that [...] on behalf of our clients anyway. And they [line management] know that they can't mess us around because they've basically taught us how to sue organisations, we are trained like lethal weapons! [P2-Associate-Mid-sized commercial]

While this finding is specific to this sample and therefore not relevant to employees in other occupations, it highlights that some employees are willing to take a combative approach to address implementation gaps. Less combative approaches, still drawing on expert power, were also described. One associate, whose membership of a professional network for female lawyers provided her an overview of the sector's approach to gender diversity in the profession, felt her expertise made her more able to challenge the status quo in relation to HR practices that affect women, such as agile working policy.

### ***Information power***

The importance of using information to persuade management either to introduce policy, or to more consistently implement practices, was noted by one individual describing her organisation's decision to introduce agile working policy:

I had been party to some of the discussions about it beforehand. And apparently they'd done a study at one law firm where they'd [senior management] realised that it really increased people's productivity [P5-Associate-Mid-sized commercial].

Seeing the effectiveness of using an evidence base to convince, may explain why the use of this type of power underpinned the tactics employed by some of the participants. This was evident among individuals who held positions in a professional network and were seeking to effect change more systemically in the profession. One participant discussed needing to 'educate' organisations about the benefits of agile working to effect 'enduring change' – alluding to a business case for this practice. This fits with the reported permanent success of this approach because it effects socially independent change – i.e. behaviour continues independently of the influencer, because this approach leads to cognitive change and ultimately private acceptance (Raven, 2008).

As well as directly presenting information to management, individuals described 'indirect informational power' - allowing managing partners to draw conclusions themselves from observing agile working policy working in practice:

I know that when I started it [flexible working], quite a few people found it a bit difficult to get their heads around it. But actually after a while all the

partners that I worked with were like ‘I never know where you are but I don't care because all the work gets done’ [P10-Senior Associate-Large Commercial]

Compiling and sharing evidence from other firms, where policy and practice are working well, combined with connection power – i.e. having the ear of an influencer, was a further means of harnessing information power and an example of combining power sources. Indeed, the effectiveness of using information combined with connection power was confirmed by one of the participants who was in senior management (a partner).

### ***Connection power***

Connection power was deemed effective for influencing HR implementation. ‘Getting in front of senior management’ and ‘getting to the right person’ were described. Conversely, the following participant, describing her lack of confidence to effect policy change, stated:

...maybe I would feel different if I was on the Steering Committee and actually sort of had access to people [P6-Senior Associate-Magic circle]

Her comment illuminates one way of creating connection power through committee membership or employee groups and was identified by other participants (and again, highlights combining power sources: legitimate and connection). However, this approach may not always work, as despite having access to partners within her group, one interviewee explains how her request to have a particular HR practice instituted was blocked. Thus, it may be required that this approach is supported by other forms

of influence, to secure success. Both partners in the sample acknowledged the need to use connection power to be heard – possibly using a mentor to fight one’s corner, or well-placed colleagues. However, this signals that in order to be powerful, one must know the powerful and again raises questions of perceived procedural fairness.

Building coalitions was another way that individuals of this sample employed connection power. Power in numbers meant that senior individuals might take note of what was being said:

If all of the workforce was saying we need this, then yes, I think it probably would make it harder for them to say no. [P17-Associate-American]

This participant recognises that in line with Latané’s social impact theory (1981), an influence attempt from multiple sources is more impactful in its ability to persuade.

## **Discussion**

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of ‘others’, and in particular female employees, in HR implementation. In doing so, it sought to address an area that warrants further attention, since the link between HRM and performance remains in need of clarification (Boxall, 2012) and may be explained by the way HR practices are implemented. This study offers the following contributions: firstly, the findings demonstrate that despite lacking formal authority to influence organisational policy, employees do play a role in HR implementation. Female employees are active in shaping their work environment, and at all stages of the HR implementation process (as delineated by Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Secondly, the strategies adopted to shape HR implementation draw on various resources in upwardly influencing



management, under whose remit HR implementation typically falls. Dependent on the success of those strategies and the organisational response to them, the consequences of experiencing HR practices may vary, highlighting implications for perceived fairness in organisations and the link between HR practices and performance. This discussion will address each contribution in turn and consider theoretical and practical implications.

### **The stages at which employees attempt to influence HR implementation**

Involvement of the employees in this study was apparent at all stages of the HR implementation process. Proactive involvement (i.e. not invited by the organisation), however, was most evident at the intersection where policy becomes practice, or fails to (i.e. the implementation gap). This perceived gap between what employees believe their organisation offers in relation to ‘agile working’ and what is actually usable in practice was the main catalyst for attempts to influence practice. The importance of this finding, that employees attempt to shape practices in order to bridge the gap between policy and practice, is that they (employees) may be integral to whether HR practices can achieve their intended outcomes. This potential bridging function of employees suggests that models of the HR-performance link should incorporate the role of employees in the process; theorising needs to take account of the negotiation that occurs at the point of implementation and its success (in part influenced by management receptiveness to employee influence). This is significant because as earlier evidence has found, the implementation process impacts how employees feel about and respond to their organisation (Khilji and Wang, 2006). Indeed, this study found that employee exit results in instances where bridging that gap was not possible. As such, management, as primary implementers, needs to be open to

continued dialogue and possibly co-production on what policy should look like and how it is implemented in order to meet employee needs. The finding that an implementation gap stemmed from misalignment between an organisation's practices and its culture (e.g. one of presenteeism), suggests that greater efforts are required by managers to align the organisational values with the practices they underpin.

As a key determinant of an individual's working conditions, HR policy will naturally be contested by those who feel it isn't delivering its promises. However, a number of participants also had more altruistic motives for wishing to effect change, linked to their role as ambassador for others in their organisations or the profession, whilst also understanding the need for a business case for agile working. This extends other scholarly work on the motives for intervening in HR implementation (e.g. Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2015), and understanding motives matters because in the process of negotiating the dynamic working environment, if managers can understand employees' rationale for contesting practices, it may encourage their willingness to co-produce with employees. Theoretically speaking, whether motives are individually or collectively driven, has implications for which stage of the process employees intervene. This study found that at the collective level, it is more likely to occur at the inception or quality of policy stage, whereas at the level of individual, it tends to be stages 3 and 4 – the actual implementation and quality thereof. These findings reinforce Woodrow and Guest's (2014) assertion about the stages at which employee involvement tends to be observed, however, this study suggests that the role they describe as 'passing judgement' extends to employees acting on that judgement and attempting to shape practices.

### **The strategies employed to influence HR implementation**

Typically, employees lack authority to formally shape organisational practices, yet this study revealed that they nonetheless utilise personal and positional resources to that end. Accepting that employees are not passive recipients of HRM, this study examined the agency and tactics through which individuals seek to influence working practices. In attempting to shape implementation, employees drew on many power sources (French and Raven, 1959), circumventing their lack of hierarchical position power by using their membership in key committees, for example, or using expertise and connections to convince of the need to change how agile working practices are enacted. Previous studies (e.g. Boselie, Paauwe and Jansen, 2001; Macky and Boxall, 2007) find that employees' attitudes mediate the HRM-Performance relationship, however these findings suggest that behavioural responses, such as the influencing behaviours identified by this study, should also be considered in that relationship.

While these resources may reside in the power arsenal of employees, the possible ramifications of utilising them may be a moderator of their use, as the study's findings suggest. This was evidenced by stories of women quitting their organisation rather than dealing with an untenable working environment, should they push for the policies to be implemented to the letter. Other, potentially detrimental implications were revealed, linked to procedural justice. Where personal power sources, such as referent or connection are employed, there is inherent potential for biased treatment. This alludes to the concept of LMX because of notions of in-group favouritism, and highlights the need to consider such variables in theorising the process – not just as a mediator between HR implementation and outcomes (Soens et al., 2012), but potentially as an antecedent of the quality or even occurrence of HR implementation.

That personal relationships can influence implementation for individual employees underlines that power differentials between employees are important and illuminates the potential unfairness in organisations. As Pratto (2015 p1) states: ‘...having (more) power or lacking sufficient power enhances or curtails the...quality of people’s lives’; for some, the powerlessness to shape working conditions led to exit and therefore, managers should heed and consider ways to manage these differentials. This may be especially important in a partnership structure that characterises professional service firms because their employees are the potential future of these organisations; their sustained commitment is therefore paramount. Fairness, through consistency of implementation across employees, is also important because it improves employee satisfaction with HRM, which is subsequently linked to organizational performance (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004).

Thus, considering Boxall’s (2012) question ‘when, why, how and for whom’ do HR systems work, it is those with power to leverage who can ensure HR works for them. An important implication from an employee perspective therefore, is that individuals build resources in their working lives that allow them to have influence in organisations, for as long as gaps between policy and practice exist.

### **Limitations and future research**

Future research in this area could usefully address some of the limitations of the present study. The all female sample was able to clarify how typically less powerful individuals (in this case women lawyers, as a group who are less prevalent in managerial/partnership positions in law; Tomlinson et al., 2013), attempt to shape organisational life to their needs. However, it may also be enlightening to examine the

strategies of male employees at the same level to illuminate how gender interacts with power and HRM to affect individuals' working lives. Given the male-dominated higher echelons of many firms (in law and outside), it might be expected that male non-managerial employees would tend to draw more on connection or referent power. The 'old boys network' at the top of organisations, which Oakley (2000: 328) describes as "an informal male social system that stretches within and across organizations" and that excludes women, may provide opportunities for male non-managerial employees to have influence through connection power. Further, the similarity of male employees to those in power (other men) may, through the mechanism of 'homophily' (our tendency to interact more readily with others' more like ourselves), lead to a greater tendency to utilise referent power (knowing that other men may identify more with them). Woodson (2014) has already shown homophily to be prevalent within law firms in relation to race and hiring decisions, suggesting it could indeed extend to other practices.

This study also focused on a professional cohort, which may influence the type of power available to employees (e.g. expert or connection) and therefore, tells us little about whether non-professional employees' role in implementation would be comparable. Although the study focused on a stakeholder little examined to date, the role of other stakeholders may also be worthy of attention, including clients (although not reported, participants of this study highlighted the pressure put on management by clients regarding flexible practices) and competitors (who may prompt new policy and practice). Managers are well established agents in the HR implementation process, but future studies might examine how they view, experience and react to employees' attempts to upwardly influence, in order to further unravel the negotiation that occurs

in relation to HR implementation and the drivers of successful negotiation for both parties.

Another limitation of the study is that it only examined one area of HR policy (agile working) rather than the full range of HR policy areas. Given this narrow focus, it would be useful to consider whether the same kinds of strategies and tactics are as applicable to other policy areas. Flexible working is a policy proactively sought after by employees, whereas other policies, such as those in relation to performance management are not. Further research could seek to clarify this.

## **Conclusion**

In understanding how HR policy and practice relates to organisational performance, research has come far, not least in the recognition that process is as important as content. As argued by Woodrow and Guest (2014), effective implementation is a precondition for a relationship between HRM and organisational performance and therefore highlights the importance of fully understanding how this process evolves. However, illuminating the role of line managers and HR professionals in the HR implementation process, only provides a partial story. The present study was able to examine the role that other stakeholders play in how HR policy evolves and unfolds in practice. In conducting their role as implementers of HRM, managers must heed employees' role in HR policy enactment, as it could be critical to the eventual success of HR initiatives, and subsequent performance. Like many aspects of organisational life, the enactment of policy is a dynamic and potentially contested process and depending on the approach to and outcomes of that negotiation, the employment relationship can suffer or thrive. Uncovering the ways in which non-managerial

employees can intervene and shape HR implementation allows further understanding of how HR practices can serve both employees and organisations alike.

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